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Life Between Faces*

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abstract

In this article, we explore the space between faces, also known as interfaces. We argue that this space can only be properly understood if we are willing to abandon an isolationist logic. Metaphors of contagion, infection, radiation and heat are employed to counteract this logic and to describe what we think interfaces are all about. Many of these metaphors can be found in the work of Peter Sloterdijk, a German philosopher who is relatively unknown in the Anglophone world. The article may also serve as a short introduction to some of his ideas. We relate them to those of Deleuze, Guattari and Žižek and conclude that humanist ideas about subjectivity undermine a proper understanding of interfaces.

Introduction

Our intention in this article is to elaborate on the popular concept of 'interfaces'. We want to argue that this concept can only be properly understood if we are willing to abandon the isolationist logic that traditionally underlies much theorising in sociology and philosophy. That is, we claim that the idea of an interface can only be meaningfully explored if we are using metaphors of contagion and infection. Following Peter Sloterdijk, a German philosopher whose work has been largely ignored in the Anglophone world, we hope to make clear that these metaphors have a long standing in western thinking and can be traced back to the Renaissance. We use Sloterdijk's interpretation of Dante's Inferno and of Marsilio Ficino to make clear what might be at stake in the debates on interfaces. Later in the article, we relate these ideas to those expressed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as Slavoj Žižek. We do not intend to provide a neat discussion of the basic arguments contained in the works of the philosophers mentioned here, but we utilise some of their ideas to express our concerns about human and perhaps not-so-human forms of togetherness in a world that seems to be entangled in a paradox of isolation (individualism, self-management, hedonism, etc.) and connection (communication, togetherness, network, etc.).

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The sun in your chest

For a long time people believed that quasi-mystical experiences such as falling in love were in fact cases of poisoning or contagion. This belief assumed that the interior space of the human body was a kind of forge containing liquid substances that were able to melt and mix with other, possibly alien, substances, a process with often unforeseen and hence dangerous consequences. For people living in a Cartesian world, with all its logic of purity, it is difficult to understand how literally the physiology of intermingling liquids was taken. However, for many writers in the Middle Ages togetherness in the amorous sense of the word was not only something that belonged to a spiritual realm, but also something which implied a "subtly physiological conditioning with remote effects" (Sloterdijk, 1998: 37). What does it mean when we, post-Cartesians, are expected to take this idea in a literal sense?

Sloterdijk provides us with the example of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) who argues that the passion between a particular man and a particular woman is caused by mutual eye-contact. This implies that two persons looking at each other are not at all engaged in an innocent process. Ficino conceives of it as a radiological event during which both partners cast rays towards each other. These rays are, he believes, poisonous, basically because they contain "subtle and nebulous blood" which is left behind in the heart region of the beloved partner. Once arrived there, it is quickly transubstantiated in less subtle blood with normal thickness. Lovers looking at each other are hence quite literally engaged in a process of contamination. This becomes particularly evident when one realises that blood left behind in the heart region of a partner longs to go back to the vessels it came from. Consequently, this partner develops an unstoppable desire to be with the other, a desire we know as love.

Note, however, that there is more than the intermingling of substances. The imagery invoked by Ficino is also *permeated* by radiology. The heart is an organ of radiation and emanation, or, as Sloterdijk puts it, it is the sun of all organs. Since the heart is where the soul resides, it is not foolish to argue that the soul also displays certain radiological and emanating properties. Renaissance psychology indeed seems to assume that the soul is a sort of "radio room for transactions with inspiring others" (1998: 125). Togetherness, Sloterdijk points out, has distinctive radiological aspects.

In a post-Cartesian world, the charm of Ficino's psychology has become somewhat elusive. Where togetherness was once understood as invoking a circulation of high temperatures, that is, where suns, high-energy fusion, and bubbling and boiling liquids were once the dominant metaphors to describe what could be going on between people, somewhere in the 16th or 17th century a massive disenchantment and cooling down of the heart is beginning to impose itself on the minds of people. The rise of anatomic science was crucial for this process. Cutting and opening bodies taught people that they were, if not mentally then at least physically, utterly alone in the cosmos. In the new paradigm, the body came to be understood as an entity in its own right, or, to be more precise, as a functional unit incapable of smoothly entering into relationships with other units. Anatomy, it was believed, provided evidence that the human body was, if anything, an autonomous laboratory. Importantly, this cooling procedure implied a complete redesign of the cardiac function: Once a Sun King amidst other organs, it now

became a machine, a pump, or, to paraphrase Sloterdijk, the chief clerk in the blood circulation. Subtle physiology was replaced by bureaucratic mechanics. Contagion and poison became illegal and were substituted by organisation and system. But let us return to Ficino's world for a moment in order to come to a closer understanding of what it is that we seem to have lost.

Interfacial tenderness and terror

In Ficino's view of the world, human togetherness equals *concordia*: the unanimous togetherness of hearts. The ability to affect the heart with eye-rays assumes the presence of a space where four eyes can meet. This space, however, conditions not only the kind of erotic or rather exceptional eye-contacts described by Ficino but also more innocent and less radical kinds of intersubjectivity than the amorous one. But even in such scenarios there is an understanding that faces can do something to each other, or put differently, that faces engage in infectious relationships. The space between four eyes is never an empty field or a vacuum but permeated by turbulent radiation.

Sloterdijk shows us how this should be understood by an extended discussion of two of the finest frescoes painted by Giotto: *The Meeting at the Golden Gate* and *The Betrayal of Christ*. In both pieces of art, the principal persons look each other straight in the eye, but the differences between what is going on between Joachim and Anna on the one hand and Jesus and Judas on the other are striking. The first fresco depicts a happy meeting where both partners, Joachim and Anna, perfectly know what to expect of each other. Each, writes Bruce Cole (1976: 76), "has been told of the miracle that is to take place, and they are overjoyed. This old and barren couple will soon have a child, a fact they both know and share in this great meeting." Cole points out that there is an atmosphere of solidity and stability in their embrace which is symbolised by the halo that "unites them as they tenderly hold each other."

The second fresco depicts a meeting where tenderness is fully absent and togetherness takes an entirely different, more horrifying form. Amidst a crowd of agitated and violent people, Christ, who is fully aware of what has happened, looks down at Judas whose "distorted features resemble the face of some mean animal." (Cole, 1976: 86). In contrast with the first meeting, there is no halo that unites Jesus and Judas. There is only one that circles around Jesus (and also one around Peter who is to the far left end of the painting), indicating that he is always willing to build spheres of togetherness. Judas, on the other hand, clearly remains a lonely and inner-directed subject. Both look each other in the eye but understand that togetherness between them is, if anything, an illusion. It is, we submit, the eye-contact which makes the fresco so dramatic. As Cole (1976: 87) points out, "[t]his is one of the most horrible confrontations, not only for Jesus but [also] for Judas, who hanged himself afterward." Cole adds: "How much more dramatic is this split second than that before the kiss, or the kiss itself." It is only by virtue of an eye-contact that Judas comes to realise the magnitude of his crime and that Christ begins to resign to his fate.

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The interfacial space can thus be seen as a site of tenderness or terror. No matter which of both poles dominate the space, it is also haunted by mystery. In both of Giotto's frescoes, one can observe that the interfacial space is filled with enigmatic and contorted facial parts (which belong to other, mostly anonymous bystanders). In the case of the terrifying encounter, the facial parts between Jesus and Judas denote, according to Sloterdijk, the illusory nature of their togetherness. In the case of the happy encounter, the facial parts between Joachim and Anna indicate that even if togetherness is successful and people are willing to come to mutual understanding and inspiration, enigma is inevitable. Note, however, that the encounter of Jesus with Judas is all but enigmatic: the eye contact indicates that both men know exactly what they have in store for each other. In the case of Joachim and Anna, there is an understanding that they can trust each other, but this is not tantamount to saying that their relationship is not puzzling.

Sloterdijk points out that on these frescoes even Jesus is bestowed with a unique human face, something for which Giotto was severely criticised, most notably in East-Europe where orthodox scholars pointed out that the idea of Jesus having a human face was no less than heretic. For Giotto, however, Jesus is not only the son of God but also a unique person with certain psychological traits, that is, a *uomo singulare* who wants to be recognised as such. From Giotto onwards, faces have become the site of psychological richness. Most notably, Giotto's work in the Arena Chapel in Padua challenges visitors to develop the heretofore unknown skill of 'reading' human faces. Giotto made the idea that faces are the condition *sine qua non* of humanity imaginable. To put it in words used much later by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the genesis of a human being is inconceivable without *visagéité* or 'faciality'. It is the face that makes us human. Human encounters are typically taking place in an interfacial space. Giotto has shown us what this might entail.

As we shall soon elaborate in somewhat more detail, Sloterdijk criticises Deleuze and Guattari for the particular way they use the idea of faciality. He himself introduces the notion of 'protraction' (*pro-trahere,* portray), which is to be understood as the biologically and culturally evolutionary process by means of which beaks, snouts, and muzzles are slowly transmogrified into faces. Whatever the evolution may be, Sloterdijk is convinced that it is also a "facial-genetic process ultimately leading to the threshold of 'portrayability'". The process of protraction is what arouses an environmental awareness in people: it is what enables them to understand that there are other creatures with faces around them. As instruments of evolution, Sloterdijk contends, faces are more important than brains or hands. To sustain this claim he points to the biological importance of the face when it comes to the selection of partners and argues that their faces and eyes radiate certain "welcome qualities". Faces call each other into being. They flourish in an interfacial circle of mutual openness. To summarise, Giotto was among the first to understand that faces are "sculptures of attentiveness" (Sloterdijk, 1998: 168).

We will now set ourselves to the task of finding out whether we are still able to see faces in this way.

Icy seductiveness

Sloterdijk disagrees with Deleuze and Guattari in that he, like Wyschogrod (1990), believes in the universality of protraction, something which is emphatically denied in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In so doing, Sloterdijk takes the sting out of the social criticism on which Deleuze and Guattari base their understanding of faciality. Yet, we will see below that he is also in agreement with at least some of Deleuze and Guattari's contentions. In order to understand his somewhat ambivalent attitude towards Deleuze and Guattari, we have to look more closely at the role of the face in their social criticism.

They start by observing that the face represents a sort of anomaly in the sense that it is both something material and something ideal. More straightforwardly, the face is a part of a human body that begot a certain culturally determined pretence of ideality. We should notice here right away that this facial ideality might be seen as a major effect of the process of protraction: the face of another person makes us aware of her alterity and vulnerability, a point also made by Wyschogrod (who in turn follows Levinas, 1990: 229). For Deleuze and Guattari, however, the pretences of facial ideality should be deconstructed and they start this exercise with typical aggression:

> The face is not a universal. It is not even that of the *white man*; it is white man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes. The face is Christ. The face is the typical European, what Ezra Pound called the average sensual man, in short, the ordinary everyday Erotomaniac. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 176, emphasis added)

We submit that these remarks on the face are intended to undo the idealistic lessons about interfaces that people from Giotto to Sloterdijk or Wyschogrod have in mind. Rather than being an instrument for the creation of tender or terrifying forms of togetherness, the face is an instrument, Deleuze and Guattari argue, that seeks to undermine togetherness. The invocation of the *white man* in the quotation above points to the excluding rather than including effects of the face. For Deleuze and Guattari the face is a rather terrifying idea which allows one part of the body to dominate the rest of it. The face dominates the body, it dictates who is human and who is not, and, most importantly, it allows us to construct the world in binary oppositions. As such it can be compared with the Central Processing Unit of a computer which helps us to organise the world in terms of oppositions. Rather than being the hallmark of humanity, the face stands for inhumanity and merely points to the zombie-like emptiness of the white man's interior. In a sense, this emptiness, or more accurately, this 'black hole' ceaselessly scans a white surface on the opposite side, its task being to organize this surface in cool structures and dichotomies which allow us to distort phenomena in such a way that the intelligence of the white man is able to cope with them. The face takes care that human beings are men *or* women, adults *or* children, leaders *or* followers, enemies *or* friends.

Such a deconstruction of the face shows us that interfaces are not so much spaces of radiating heat as spaces where a cool selection mechanism is in operation that tells subjects who is and who is not to be excluded. The face allows for a politics of contradiction: it tells people who are entitled to togetherness and who are not. "The face", Deleuze and Guattari claim, "is a politics". Rather than arguing that the face

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allows for a space where morality (Levinas) or togetherness (Sloterdijk) can become possible, the face also allows for domination and exclusion.

Before entering into Sloterdijk's response to Deleuze and Guattari's challenge we wish to re-emphasise the absence of heat in the interfacial space described by the two French philosophers. We suggest that they talk about three sorts of interfaces: (a) the black machine against the white wall; (b) a phenomenon inscribed on the white wall against a second phenomenon inscribed on it; (c) 'yes' against 'no' as possibilities of choice. No contagion or radiation takes places in the interfacial space described here. The atmosphere is icy. Not that the perspectives offered here are unattractive, on the contrary, the virginity of the white wall is breathtaking and offers a plethora of possibilities for binary inscription. The impenetrability of the black hole is stunning because it allows for an unprecedented and amoral decisiveness. The seductiveness of these icy atmospheres lies in the idea of seeing the world as a place where decision-making is relatively easy: All you need to do is to say yes or no. Indeed, the seduction of these binary possibilities is so powerful as to make it quite difficult to imagine that the world can also be approached in a different way. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari extensively try to deconstruct the binary oppositions generated by cool interfaces. They are not interested in happily bringing the opposite pairs to a synthesis as in Hegel's dialectics. Rather, they show respect for the distance between these pairs but do not wish to entail that they are mutually exclusive. Indeed, we have to conceive these pairs as opposites that can do something to each other. At this point Sloterdijk and Deleuze and Guattari have something important in common. Their stress on the possibility of contagion also evidences that, objectively speaking, there need not be a black hole scanning a white wall in the first place.

Yet, the idea of such an icy interface is introduced by Deleuze and Guattari to make clear that faces have a proclivity towards domination. Faciality is hence a fiction which in the name of face either renders the face faceless or excludes other faces from the interfacial space. This can only be achieved by a machine that has been designed to prevent the development of a four-eyes interface. Simply put, it thus prevents us from engaging in high-energy relationships.

Interfacial nightmares

Although there is no doubt, as we will see in this section, that Sloterdijk is in sympathy with much of the social criticism that can be found in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, he refuses to solely identify the face with power. His descriptions of the face are not primarily related to cool interfaces where the possibility of contagion has to be excluded. On the contrary, he takes issue with Deleuze and Guattari on this point and argues that there are and have been interfacial spaces where faces can infect each other. He writes, in sum, about interfacial hothouses rather than about icy machines of faciality.

But in spite of this difference in focus, Sloterdijk is much more sympathetic to Deleuze and Guattari than Wyschogrod who starts with the (Levinasian) observation that ...

> the despotic face masks what is common to faces: the manifestation of mortality that, irrespective of race, gender, and class, is expressed in every face, a mortality that the attitudinal specificity of each face either allows to become transparent or conceals. Even when faces express types - the artist, the soldier, the schoolgirl - there is always already a primordial signification attributable to them, the mortality of the existent. (Wyschogrod, 1990: 226)

For Wyschogrod, it is clear that the human face expresses vulnerability and mortality and she quite rightly relates the refusal of Deleuze and Guattari to accept this to their bio-philosophy in which death is redefined as an event in life during which intensities, energies, and flows are redistributed in multiple ways. In other words, for Deleuze and Guattari the face cannot bespeak death, simply because there is no death in the universe they describe. Consequently, the facial claim to vulnerability, finitude, or mortality cannot but be ideological and political.

Against this claim Wyschogrod holds that each attempt to further deconstruct the face amounts to acting upon it with violence. Her criticism of Deleuze and Guattari is emotional and angry. She does not understand why they want to deconstruct perhaps the only reminder we have of the other's essential vulnerability and mortality. "The guillotine", she writes, "is so often regarded with horror not only because it kills but because in concentrating upon the head, it violates the source of the proscription against murder" (1990: 227). The face, she adds, may indeed have many meanings, but it always "exhibits the possibility of its own negation" (1990: 229) and therefore renders superfluous each attempt at further deconstruction. Generosity and compassion are far better, indeed, saintly candidates for responding to this vulnerability of face than philosophical deconstruction.

As we hope to show, Sloterdijk's criticism of Deleuze and Guattari differs from Wyschogrod's in that he concedes that they may have provided a rather astute description of what might turn out to be an interfacial nightmare of truly horrifying proportions. His criticism starts, as we have seen, with questioning Deleuze and Guattari's claim that the face is not universal. Sloterdijk points out that interfacial hothouses have come into being everywhere in this world. The facial genesis or, as Sloterdijk prefers to call it, protraction has allured people from all over the world and can be seen as omnipresent plastic surgery. Admittedly, there are local differences but they are to be understood as regional descriptions of something universal.

Sloterdijk thus prefers to start with interfacial hothouses rather than with icy machinery. He notes that such hothouses are entwined with trust and gaiety, because facial radiation or resonance is often a happy contact: think here of a mother and child beaming at each other. However, there are many exceptions where happiness is painfully absent. Interfacial hothouses are also places were faces are able to spell trouble: the angry look of the same mother who is about to punish her child. These hothouses are, as Sloterdijk points out, also places where punishment, tasks assignment, or obedience are able to flourish. From this it should be clear that Sloterdijk does not extol the interfacial hothouse, something which brings him quite close to Deleuze and Guattari: he understands that the interfacial promises may turn out be very disappointing indeed. Living between faces can become nightmarish.

Sloterdijk also hints, in line with Deleuze and Guattari, at the exclusive effects of face. He points out that there is a long tradition in Western and other societies in which women were simply denied a face and in which the non-facial aspects of women were regarded to be more important: in ancient art, pelvis, bosom, or vulva were the dominant physical attributes in masculine representations of women. The very idea that women could master the art of participating in interfacial happiness simply did not occur to male artists. Where the masculine face slowly began to emerge as a theme for sculptors or painters, the feminine face was destined to remain much more obscure than, say, the face of a masculine God. Sloterdijk goes so far as to suggest that the obscurity of the feminine face is the reason why the beaming interface of mother-child has been so painfully absent in the arts and that this may indeed provide us with an explanation of why interfaces could become sites of social catastrophe (see Giotto's representation of Jesus and Judas). Much earlier than Giotto people knew that interfacial hothouses could become sites of terror. Masks and mask painting were ways to evade such sites: interfacial catastrophe could be avoided if one was able to ban the face from a sphere of intimacy.

In other words, interfacial hothouses are places of risk that can only be avoided by stopping the process of protraction. This is exactly, Sloterdijk suggests, a task carried out with perfection by monitors, cameras, assessment forms, and internet. By means of technology we are able to replace protraction by distraction and abstraction. What we now commonly accept as the meaning of the word 'interface' is no longer the space between two faces but the space between face and non-face, perhaps even between non-face and non-face (1998: 193). What we now witness with the rise of new media is a massive de-portrayal of the world. Whatever is left of the face will be reduced to the facial machine whose major task it is to relentlessly carry on the further de-portrayal of the world. This comes, we submit, quite close to Deleuze and Guattari's nightmare: the face has become nothing but an idea that paradoxically serves to efface itself. Rather than being a possible source of happiness, the face has become rather uncanny in Western civilization. How could it have come so far?

Lost gaiety

Lurking behind these discussions are intuitions about the possibility or impossibility of happiness. Giotto's sculptures of attentiveness create spaces of radiating happiness; Deleuze and Guattari's icy interfaces, on the other hand, seem to rule out happiness. We suggest that this difference represents a substantial and epochal shift in the way philosophers and artists have come to think about the possibility of happiness. For the Greeks, happiness was always closely related to the gaze that people can share with each other. 'Our original idea of happiness', writes the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari, "is dependent on a culture of seeing, on a culture of the gaze; our happiness is originally a happiness of seeing, a happiness of having the ability to see. The perfectly clear gaze stands for happiness and joy" (1981: 24). In passing we may note that for the old Greeks happiness and theorising (*theorein* = gazing at) go hand in hand. One cannot gaze without feeling happy and one cannot be happy without a gaze. Joy and happiness are, Cacciari suggests, ways of seeing festivities and this is ultimately what *theorein* and

being a theoretician are all about: feasting one's eyes on the Gods and the marvels of the world.

The Romans already started to tinker with these jubilant ideas about communities of happy theoreticians. For them, *contemplatio* is not so much related with seeing as with cutting (*temnoo*) or isolating. From now on theorising is no longer what happens in a public space but what goes on in a well-demarcated area (*templum*) and the happiness of the theoretician is now closely linked to the availability of isolated spaces. The inward gaze slowly becomes more important than the outward gaze the Greeks were so jubilant about. From the Romans onward, happiness can now be achieved in isolation or by wilfully shutting one's eyes for the marvels of the world. In the Roman age, the kind of happiness linked with *theorein* is no longer able to arouse astronomers, augurs and philosophers. Now the theoretician becomes able to see a transcendent god who no longer laughs and partakes in worldly and godly festivities but who has risen above the world and can only be seen in special and privileged places. The happy gaze disappears and is replaced by a most serious, aesthetic and even melancholic gaze that knows only too well that it will no longer be able to fulfil its unrelenting desire for that lost Greek gaiety.

Nonetheless, Ficino's theory of intermingling liquids and Giotto's frescos still bespeak the intuition that happiness is not to be found in isolation but between faces. In this sense, they can be said to maintain the old Greek understanding that gazes, theorising, and happiness are interrelated. Nebulous blood and auras are thus theoretical in the old Greeks sense of the word. Nowadays, it has become extremely difficult for artists to paint faces and interfacial atmospheres that are rife with happiness. Where we see faces, we almost automatically sense despair, melancholy, or aestheticism. Take, for example, Giacometti's portraits and we may get a closer idea of the icy seductiveness we wrote about in relation to Deleuze and Guattari. In Giacometti's portraits, we look at faces but these faces are strangely detached from life as if they were frozen in an uncanny void. Giacometti's world is one of withdrawal and remoteness and forces the spectator not to engage with the faces she sees but rather to look inward. This world induces *contemplatio*. As Maurice Blanchot (1971: 247) argued, "Giacometti demands of the spectator a relationship of distance, of absolute distance." In this distance, we merely see a presence that hints at the indelible strangeness of the other, of the world, even of ourselves. Rather than inviting us to engage in a radiating relationship, we see that the faces have become instruments of distance, alienation and detachment. "The longer I look to a face", says Giacometti (1958: 12), "the more unknown it becomes to me. It retracts in the rungs of an unknown ladder."

Giacometti's principal subject seems to be the loss of communication and in embroidering on it he is full of melancholia as to what might have been lost in the interfaces that have become so icy. In his faces we see, if anything, our own desolate selves rather than the rejoicing of Anna and Joachim. His paintings show the kind of interfaces that are contemplated upon by Deleuze and Guattari even though the latter's anti-melancholical stance is entirely alien to Giacometti. Gazing at each other has become elusive for us, post-Cartesians. Our eyes don't see anymore. They have slowly begun to eat. While *Mona Lisa* gazes at us in a benign yet enigmatic way, the space between her and us has been taken over by security guards, bulletproof glass and

cameras scanning our behaviour. Feeling that any interaction with her is excluded, we have no choice but to cannibalise on her and to eat more famous highlights before returning to Wyoming, Sapporo or Groningen. Our eyes have become instruments of consumption and marketers, advertisers, and media persuade us that this is what happiness is all about in times that do not want to lay a wager on interfacial hothouses anymore (De Cauter, 1995). This brings us back to Sloterdijk's philosophy.

Life with(out) mirrors

Sloterdijk points out that, historically, the disappearance of interfacial hothouses set in as soon as people forgot about a basic law, still held in honour by antiquity, saying that they have faces for others and not for themselves. The antique face is, if anything, a face for somebody else: my ability to look back at you always assumes that you were the one who looked at me. Apart from some rather exceptional narcissistic water experiments, there is nothing in antiquity that warrants a self-reflexive turn. It would take a long time before mirrors were finally able to make their entry in interfacial reality, but the consequences were enormous. Only a culture that would become fascinated with mirrors could develop the idea that the face is also something that might be related to the self rather than to the other. In a culture of mirror owners people not only have a face for others but also for themselves, something which was absolutely impossible, if we are to believe Sloterdijk, in antiquity. It is important to realise that Narcissus did not so much fall in love with his own face but with a face of which he had to think it belonged to another person simply because he was only familiar, at least until the famous moment at the water pool, with other faces. The beautiful face he saw in the water was not even recognised as his own for in a world without mirrors the ability to have a face implied the presence of other people.

It would take until the sixteenth century before mirrors would make it possible, in words of Lewis Mumford, "to find an image that corresponded accurately to what others saw" (1963: 129). Mumford adds:

> Self-consciousness, introspection, mirror-conversation developed with the new object itself ... and the sense of the separate personality, a perception of the objective attributes of one's identity, grows out of this communion. The use of the mirror signalled the beginning of introspective biography in the modern style: that is, not as a means of edification but as a picture of the self, its depths, its mysteries, its inner dimensions. The self in the mirror ... was the self *in abstracto*, only part of the real self, the part that one can divorce from the background of nature and the influential presence of other men. (Mumford, 1963: 129)

Sloterdijk puts it in terms of an intersubjective space that is substituted by a subjective one where a stoic individual resides. In other words, the dyadic personality who depends on and always looks for interfacial hothouses disappears and is replaced by a point-subject who lives out the fantasy of his or her own intimacy to which others have no access. The price to be paid for the new ability to see your own self was solitude: lonesome point-subjects constitute the masses who live under the terror of mirrors. Ego-technical media like mirrors ensured that the subject was no longer accessible for others. From now on, affection and infection are by definition self-inflicted.

To sum up, mirrors, nihilistic black-hole cameras or ideas such as faciality function, we suggest, as tools of immunity that reduce the risk of contamination as far as possible. Not only is it not allowed that the poles of binary opposites infect each other, but humankind also invented techniques that allow the fundamental de-portrayal of the world. These developments should, we suggest, be thought of as processes of catharsis and hygiene. The self that is absorbed by its own face and that cannot be affected by other faces understands that in the real world decisions are not based on faces but on hard facts.

Nobjects

The question we wish to pursue now is whether virtual reality experiments constitute a possibility for the creation of interfaces that allow us to escape from the facial machines discussed so far. Virtual reality, after all, assumes that the relationship between human beings and machines can only become convincing if both are willing to engage in a process of mutual infection. This, however, is only possible if we are able to render the interface as unobtrusive as possible: virtual realties are merely convincing when the user forgets that he or she works with a computer. So, the thing in front of us should no longer be exclusively regarded as an object observed by us. It also observes us. Note, however, that the distance between it and the human being is not somehow suspended; rather, it has become unclear where the object ends and the human being begins. This is tantamount to saying that the object should be allowed to affect you in such a way as to make it impossible to look upon it as an object.

According to Sloterdijk, the computer should become a *nobject*, an expression coined by the German philosopher Thomas Macho to express entities or phenomena that are not in front of us but that surround us. Objects can only become objects when a subject places itself in front of it. Nobjects, on the other hands, are 'objects' that are denied the status of object essentially because a subject is absent. Sloterdijk goes on to suggest that forms of togetherness and senses of belonging are fundamentally nobjective rather than objective and notes, in passing, that the facial machine described by Deleuze and Guattari is an engine designed to nip each form of nobjectivity in the bud. All of this assumes that intimacy or togetherness can never be objectively grasped. Both are incomprehensible when looked upon from the outside, that is, from a distance that annihilates any chance of absorption and affection. Because nobjects rule out distance, language as a distancing medium is ruled out as a way of expressing what is going on in a person who is surrounded by nobjects. Two lovers who are looking at each other see nobjects rather than objects and can therefore hardly express this in a language that is satisfactory to them.

Nowadays, in the new millennium, it is often suggested by many thinkers that technology, which has often been accused of rendering our world objective, has now reached a level which allows human beings to experiment with new forms of selfhood and intimacy or, to put it in more fashionable terms, interactivity. New computer technologies seem to be based on what Sloterdijk refers to as nobjectivation. To capture

what this nobjectivation is all about, the following quote, which is about a somewhat older technology, seems to be illuminating:

> I recognized right away why Cinerama and 3D were important. When you watch TV or a movie in a theater, you are sitting in one reality, at the same time you are looking at another reality through an imaginary transparent wall. However, when you enlarge your window enough, you get a visceral sense of personal involvement. You feel the experience, you don't just see it. I felt if I had stepped through that window and was riding the roller coaster myself instead of watching somebody else. I felt vertigo. That, to me, was significant. I thought about where the technology might go in the future, and I was convinced on the spot, sitting in that Cinerama theater on Broadway, that the future of cinema would mean the creation of films that create the total illusion of reality. (Heilig, quoted in Taylor, 1998: 279)

Technology, we may infer from this, makes possible what goes without saying in the uterus: the cinema appears as substitute for the uterus in which the difference between subject and object vanishes because it can no longer be thought of as a difference. What we have here is the description of a new type of interface, one which is no longer based on a opposition of mutually exclusive 'entities' but rather on their interpenetration.

Discussions about computer technology often seem to be permeated by similar ideas. It is assumed that the programme responds to a particular action of the user, thus creating an interactive medium. Believers argue that the borderline between man and machine is blurred in this medium. We will return to this issue later; for the moment, however, we wish to discuss the notion of interactivity and see how it is related to our concern with togetherness.

How passive is interactivity?

Sceptics have asked the question of how interactivity should be conceived of in relation to the fact that the machine seems to be much more active than the person who, after all, merely pushes some buttons, keys in a few words or commands, and waits for what the machine is going to deliver. They point out, in other words, that much of what is taking place in interactive spaces is largely passive, at least from the standpoint of the individual who is engaging with the machine. In these interactive spaces, passivity seems to engender activity. The individual achieves a truly miraculous goal: by doing near to nothing he or she can perform quite a lot. In interactive places, passivity veils and engenders activity.

Now imagine what it would be like to do the exact opposite. Is it possible to think of a situation where people are incredibly active but achieve or perform near to nothing? Žižek (1998) uses the notion of 'interpassivity' to describe such a situation. Interpassive situations occur, for example, when people are carrying out many ritual tasks without actually believing in God or without a desire to truly engage with Him. Another example of such interpassivity occurs when people are performing rituals of mourning just to evade the sort of real sadness that might come up after the death of beloved person. These instances make clear that rituals are often carried out to prevent something 'real' from happening. Other examples of interpassive behaviour are the psychiatric patient whose endless chatter and babble are merely intended to avoid some

cold truth about his or her personality popping up, the person who, while telling a joke, notes that nobody in the audience laughs and then starts to laugh him- or herself just in order not to lose face, or, finally, the employee who delivers and works out plan after plan without even the slightest chance of implementation. In interpassive places, in sum, activity veils and engenders passivity.

Žižek's point, of course, is that the difference between activity and passivity becomes senseless in interactive and interpassive spaces. Put differently, in the world of interfaces, gulfs between the passive and active can become very small indeed. To illustrate this, Žižek goes on to extensively discuss *Tamagochi*, a once fashionable toy that lives in the narrow space between activity and passivity. Tamagochi is an egg-like object, more precisely, an electronic egg, provided with control buttons and a screen which allegedly behaves like a baby, a puppy, or a duckling - you name it. It is a virtual pet animal that starts to scream when it needs attention. The screen displays instructions that indicate what should happen in order to stop the screaming. The user, oftentimes but not always an infant, pushes a few buttons so that peace will be restored quickly. The screen might, for example, indicate that the electronic egg wants to play with its owner in order to prevent its misery and play can then be initiated by pushing the adequate buttons. The screen also indicates the degree of Tamagochi's happiness: Two hearts indicate happiness and no heart equals misery. If a heartless situation extends for too long a period, Tamagochi dies out of grief and misery. Although it is possible to resuscitate the animal, this miracle will become unavailable after death occurred twice, in case of which the infant's nagging conscience can only be appeased if its parents are willing to provide a new interactive toy. (At this stage Žižek notes that the cruelty of Tamagochi's death constitutes a perverse attraction for *some* children: killing ladybirds or butterflies is replaced by neglecting the electronic egg, a process which renders killing virtual. Other children, however, turned out to be traumatised by the death of Tamagochi, which actually led the Japanese producer to launch immortal Tamagochis into the market. We submit that this is a fine example of what business ethics might amount to.)

In the grip of an egg

The electronic egg is a machine inscribed with coded desires and thus offering opportunities for their fulfilment. Surfing on the net made clear the extent to which children are in the grip of Tamagochi. Jennifer keys in the following:

> I like tomagochi's becuase it is reall teaching me responsability and i like how when you go to school you can pause it.

Connie provides us with a lecture on Tamagochi-care:

> Select Cleaning icon to clean up the baby ... If you leave your baby unattended, he/she will get sik and SICK indicator will show on the upper corner of the display. Select MEDICAL TREATMENT icon ...

Love is important in these interfacial spheres, but be reminded that it is tough love:

> If sometimes your baby is naughty, you should discipline your baby.

Let us not put in doubt the sincerity of what children feel when they write down such stuff. Indeed, for grown-up people like us, this sincerity seems rather enigmatic: emotions typical for what we hardly dare to describe as 'real care', can also come into play when we are talking about a soulless screen that substitutes a real pet or a real baby. What we have here, in other words, is an interface that can hardly count as a radiating hothouse and yet causes all sorts of emotions. It is an interface in which the activity of the object - Žižek rightly points out that the machine is always in the lead due to the irritating noises it makes - is followed by a minimum of activity on behalf of the child who is merely pushing a few buttons in order to change the baby's nappy. Yet, this minimal activity is somehow able to achieve a degree of emotional satisfaction we think many real-life mothers would perhaps only dream of. The feelings of intimacy that (should) accompany care can quite easily be incited by a machine which does not even resemble a baby or a young animal. Note that such feelings would be much less puzzling and mind-boggling if the child takes care of anthropomorphised toys like dolls or cuddly toys. But empathy with a child who preserves such feelings for a digital object that emits commands and represents nothing at all seems to be much less comprehensible.

Needless to say that there have been people who see Tamagochi as a harbinger of evil, simply because it blurs the taken for granted boundary between altruism and egoism. Jessica, we might argue, claims that she learns to cope with real responsibilities by engaging with machine that merely offers her delusions. Hence, it is conceivable that children learn to cope with such responsibilities without actually engaging with other people. Jessica can manage without 'interpersonal' togetherness. She even does not have to work very hard for it: pushing a button or two will suffice. In this sense, Tamagochi is the embodiment of indolent solipsism, which is tantamount to saying that Tamagochi is nothing less than the devil himself. This, once more, takes us back to Sloterdijk's discussion in *Spheres* about the devil. This discussion might give us an idea of what Žižek is hinting at.

The devil's minimal world

In Dante's *Inferno*, Sloterdijk argues, the devil is portrayed as a symbol of the inability to actively engage in relationships with others. He is an entity that fundamentally believes in its self-sufficiency and that is prepared to stubbornly defend this belief in the iciest and deepest regions of hell. Satan is the first intelligence that exclusively refers to its own self. Dante's exploration of hell is in Sloterdijk's view (1999: 622) not only a tour showing the poet the horrors of solitude, but also a therapy that tells him an awful lot about group therapy and the management of culture.

In Dante's poem, God should be thought of as hyperimmunity. His very existence proves to people that the forms of protection, security, and immunity they have created themselves are hopelessly inadequate. Security is only to be had in God's womb and the way to get there is a to develop a fundamental distrust with respect to systems of

immunity created by men. Dante's edifying purpose here is to make clear that the only road to some final security is to put into question the ordinary solutions for this problem. In other words, the certainties of daily life should be crushed in order to attain a new and better form of certainty or security. Weakness in the immunity system will eventually bring forth superior immunity, "for a God who is able to stand surety for the most superior insurance premium we know, that is, eternal salvation, should be capable of destroying all human certainties and replace them by a politics of the absolute." (Sloterdijk, 1999: 595-597). Hence it becomes essential to balance this positive premium with a negative one: hell teaches people what might happen if they refuse to properly insure themselves. It is only the threat of hell that makes the promise of heaven somewhat plausible. Dante makes clear how we are to appreciate this threat.

Like heaven, hell has a spherical shape which indicates that hell is an invention of God who has, as Sloterdijk points out, specialised in the creation of spherical or round forms. Hell is thus made in heaven. However, the spherical shape of hell is somewhat peculiar and is developed by a logic of its own. Dante's hell should be conceived of as a funnel-shaped megaphone reaching towards the centre of the earth. From the narrowest and deepest regions of this funnel a miserable groaning resounds which is only to become more penetrating the closer it gets to the surface of the earth. As Dante and his guide Vergil are roaming the outer spaces of hell, they feel this groaning as an icy wind in their back. This merely serves to prove that the truth of hell is not to be found in the outer spaces just below the earth's surface but deep down where the funnel becomes so narrow as to make it increasingly intolerable for its residents to have other souls around. Yet it is only in the point of the funnel that togetherness, neighbourliness or friendship becomes utterly impossible. It is in the point of the funnel where Satan resides. His dwelling is the extreme opposite of heaven which has to be thought of as an extended place. What makes hell so hellish is that the total absence of space makes solitude inevitable. The devil is, if anything, a point subject.

So, to invoke Wittgenstein's famous image, for the damned and miserable the limits of the world are increasingly narrowing down. Unhappiness always resides in an ontologically impoverished or, perhaps better, in a minimal world. Dante teaches people what will happen to them if they are banned from the community or if they have to fend for themselves. He shows how frightening individuality might become if it is thought of as something isolated. Indeed, hell is self-referring or self-inflecting individualism that refuses to have itself infected by others and indulges, like Satan, in self-pity.

As Sloterdijk points out, Dante is one of the first authors to describe what we now generally refer to as depression the core of which is the inability to open oneself to the world, to create space around the self and to inspire and have oneself inspired by others (Kaulingfreks and ten Bos, 2001). A person who is depressed seems to be bound for the point of the funnel and the only way to alter his or her course is expanding the room around his or her self as much as possible. Might this cure also work in different settings?

Hell, purgatory, and organisation

We suggest that territorial expansion, gluttony, extravagance, company takeovers and so on can all be understood as imperialistic anti-depressives. If you are not engaging in this kind of activities, imperialist ideology holds, you will sooner or later get bored with yourself and go round in satanic circles. However, these sorts of anti-depressives fail to deliver what they promise simply because they are in service of the ego. They do not expand the world, they expand the ego and this is why they are so devilish. That is, in Dante we find important cues for a *satanic organisational theory*: the extent to which organisations are occupied with self and survival of this self can be seen as a satanic trait. To paraphrase Sloterdijk (1999: 623-624), the choice between dragging rocks with the misers and spenders in the fourth circle of Dante's inferno or painstakingly negotiating with industrial partners or managers is not at all of a metaphysical nature and is merely a matter of taste.

However, if one discovers depression, one also discovers ways to evade the narrowness of a point-world. Even though Dante himself believed that the inhabitants of hell were lost cases, he profoundly believes that their misery serves as a dull reminder for those who feel the attractions of the ego. Dante of course did not invent psychotherapy, group therapy or cultural management but his invention of purgatory can certainly be seen as a first step towards them. The essence of purgatory is that it purges and chastens: the cleansing fire of purgatory is not to be found in hell, which is indeed a much chillier place than we have grown to think of, but on the Mountain of Purification (Dante, 1999: 56). If there is fire in hell it is of the punishing and not of the cleansing kind.

The idea behind Dante's invention of purgatory is to provide an alternative for the agonising determinism of eternal damnation or salvation and hence to allow for a conceptualisation of life as a path that people have to go. Dante, in other words, showed us the importance of a purpose in life, of error tolerance and forgiveness, of self-improvement and intentions, in short, of hope. Purgatory is a symbol of hope without which people would not have acquired the understanding that slaving away one's days might be useful or have a deeper meaning. An absolute dichotomy between hell and heaven, Dante came to see, merely offered stagnation and determination, so that something had to be invented in order to escape the inevitable. Purgatory allows for the possibility of progress, repayment, and redemption. It is, in some sense, the precursor of the modern-capitalist banking organisation: you owe something to someone, but eventually you will become free of all debts. The fundamental organisational principle of capitalist society is debt, as has been pointed out by Nietzsche (most notably in his *Genealogy*) and Deleuze (in collaboration with Guattari). But we should bear in mind that the corollary of debt is always hope. Purgatory and modern banking institutions deliver hope in a hopeless world and we would like to submit that contemporary managerial concepts such as learning organisations or cultural management can be related to Dante's concept of purgatory.

We argued earlier, following Sloterdijk, that hell is made in heaven, but Dante's point is also that hell is man-made. You, the reader of Dante's poem, only have to look around to see how people create their very own versions of hell and loneliness. It is the willingness to engage with these problems, hopeless and desperate as they may be, that

creates hope and all hope, Dante believes, begins with healing, purification, and self-criticism. A most important aspect of purgatory is not only that it offers such hope but also that it allows people to suffer in togetherness. Unlike hell, purgatory is a place where people do not suffer alone. On the contrary, they develop forms of solidarity because they tell each other what they live through and who they are and thus engage in self-critical practices. In hell, people's suffering is worsened because they have to bear the pain all alone. Indeed, the form of togetherness to be found in hell is merely antagonistic: sufferers endlessly fight other sufferers. This is indeed why consolation and hope are not the ingredients to be found in hell.

Faceless morality

Insofar as the devil embodies our inability to actively engage in meaningful relationships with other people, it might indeed be argued that Tamagochi, the pet-toy-automaton discussed earlier, is nothing less than the devil himself. The devil scorns intimacy and togetherness and stubbornly defends his own isolation in the icy and remotest corners of hell. At this point Žižek asks some painful questions:

> is *tamagochi* not the virtual entity, non-existent in itself, with whom we exchange signals and comply to its demands? Does not the non-imaginary character of *tamagochi* (which no longer endeavours to resemble the pet it stands for) hold especially for the Judaic tradition, with its prohibition on producing images of God? Again, no wonder that for some theologians *tamagochi* is Satan incarnate: it, as it were, lays bare the mechanism of the believer's dialogue with God, since it demonstrates how an intense, caring exchange of symbols is possible with an entity which is purely virtual - that is, which exists only as an interface simulacrum... In other words, *tamagochi* is a machine which allows you to satisfy your need to love your neighbour. (Žižek, 1998: 108-109)

What Žižek describes as the highest expression of our humanity, that is, "the compassionate need to take care of another human being", is transformed into a "dirty idiosyncratic pathology" (1998: 109) that can easily be cured in the faceless interface with Tamagochi. Hence, it becomes possible to satisfy the need to show compassion without actually becoming obtrusive or pushy towards other persons.

Bauman (1993: 91) has argued, thereby following Levinas, that the impulse to act morally - an impulse that originates in the face of the other - is always liable to turn itself into a form of power or violence of its own, simply because in wanting to act on the other's behalf I am willing to undermine his or her autonomy: "Because I am responsible, and because I do not shirk my responsibility, I must force the Other to submit to what I, in my best conscience, interpret as 'her own good'" (1993: 91).

We would like to suggest that the virtual reality that comes into being during interactions with Tamagochi allows individuals to develop a moral posture that both satisfies the deeply felt desires to behave morally and yet remains faceless enough to not deteriorate in obtrusiveness and violence. What Bauman describes as the "genuine aporia of moral proximity" (1993: 91), that is the "thin line between care and oppression" (1993: 92), can be easily ignored by all those who engage with Tamagochi. To summarise, virtual reality offers us an ethics that allows the individual to keep his or her hands clean. But would this not be the sort of faceless morality that characterises the

chilly life of desolated souls in hell? And is the contemporary version of this hell not the world of information technology? In what follows, we hope to show that easy answers to this question are not available.

The idea of contagion

What we wanted to show in the previous section is that for Žižek the idea of contagion is just as crucial as it was for Marsilio Ficino. Žižek muses about a rather primitive interface that allows the subject to remain largely uninfected by others. Such an interface allows for a clean morality that is very far away from Ficino's world of infectious hothouses. However, the very idea of morality, as Bauman sees it, seems to be based on the impossibility not to be infected by others as well as on the acceptance that in moral action one cannot keep one's hands clean (ten Bos and Willmott, 2001). For Bauman, morality assumes an interface hot enough to produce uncontrollable forms of infection. Žižek hints at the possibility of an interface that is not infectious at all: there are machines that allows us to keep other persons at a safe distance.

Most debates on the recent developments in the world of information technology, however, do not enter into the idea that machines might help the individual to develop an immunity system that keeps other human beings at a distance. On the contrary, they generally enter into how the individual can be secured from being infected by machines rather than by humans. This perspective considers it downgrading for human beings when they are linked to machines. In the remaining parts of this article, we argue that both perspectives assume a Cartesian ego for whom an infectious interface with either a person or a machine is simply out of the question. In other words, they assume an ego that refuses to have its immunity system undermined by either human being or machine. Our point is that this purist concept of the human subject is what frightens us most.

Prosthesis or cyborg?

For the Cartesian ego, the all-important question in relation to computer technology is whether we can prevent the sovereign free will of human beings from being infected by machines. Two answers might be provided. First, it might be argued that there is no problem whatsoever, because a machine will never become as sophisticated as the human brain. We don't even have or will have machines that are nearly as complex as the human body. So, the Cartesian ego need not be worried by the developments in computer technology. At best, the machine functions as a prothesis which allows the individual to either perform actions that would be impossible without it or to perform actions that would not have been executed otherwise. In the latter case, we may think of an automatic pilot which allows the real person, at least if we are to believe popular literature on the subject, to feel, to think, and to create. Other more prosaic suggestions, however, would be drinking a cup of coffee, going to the toilet or fighting hijackers. In the first case, we think of an apparatus that is connected to the body in order to increase its level of performance in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, or power. For the

Cartesian ego there is nothing to worry about in relation to prostheses. Indeed, it will argue that the sovereign ego is happy to have itself supported by various forms of sophisticated technology. Under normal conditions, prostheses do not jeopardise the free will of human beings.

However, there are those who would argue that the machine is more than an addition and it is here that the Cartesian ego starts to shudder with fear. Donna Haraway (1991: 164), for example, has claimed that the machine should not be treated as an object that needs to be animated, adored or dominated. She goes as far as to claim that the distinction between us and a machine is delusory in the sense that we are already machines or, more accurately, that the machine is already an aspect of our embodiment. Haraway's *cyborgs* are much more creepy than the prostheses discussed above because they seem to endanger free will and free decision making. Why would this be the case? The cyborg is a "hybrid of human being and machine" (1991: 171). This is to say that it is impossible to indicate where the machine stops and the human being begins and *vice versa*. This is to imply that age-old distinctions between the artificial and the natural or between life and death are blurred. Territories that should be clearly distinguished from each other start to overlap.

Kantian puppets

Against this we would argue that as far as cyborgs are concerned the relationship between man and machine is never stable, but always changing within a continuum of extreme polarities. Under particular circumstances the cyborg is more man than machine and sometimes it is more machine than man. In other words, the cyborg is not a fixed entity, but a process which can best be understood as a ceaseless struggle. It is unlikely, however, that this insight will be seen by the Cartesian ego as a satisfying answer to the painful question about free will. But is this free will, its sovereignty and invulnerability, not what should make us shudder? The answer to this question is of course very dependent upon what we understand by 'free will', but we submit that the noumenal, decontextualised, and disembedded subject which refuses to have itself infected (or: inspired, enthused, or contaminated) by men or machines is what gives us the creeps. This subject is, we suggest, symbolised by Robert Siodmak's black and impenetrable eye as we know it from his 1949 movie *The Spiral Staircase*, that is, an eye residing in damp caverns and cellars where it always looks for victims who are to be done in without hate and passion. It is, in short, the eye of the devil who, deep down in hell, reluctantly fights off even the faintest sentiments of belonging. To think of the sovereign free will is, we suggest, thinking of the icy wind we feel in our back, a wind whispering loneliness, invulnerability and purity, a wind whispering the inability to form coalitions, a wind whispering about a world without inspiration, love, and intimacy.

As Žižek (1998: 118-119) points out, Kant must have felt the horrific nature of the so-called 'noumenal' subject. Face to face with this subject, one understands that it is Satan and God simultaneously and that it is not bothered by small-scale human conflicts, nagging doubts or forms of compassion that might eventually enable one to develop

some kind of moral fortitude. This subject knows no doubts and enigmas. It simply reminisces us of the God/Satan who has provided us with rules such as the categorical imperative. We all have to obey such rules basically because that is the most rational thing to do. When pondering the consequences of this unconditional obedience to ethics, Kant writes in *Critique of Practical Reason*:

> Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty. The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even the world depends in the eyes of supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remains as it is now, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figures. (quoted in: Žižek, 1998: 119)

Kant understood very well that the sovereign and rational subject is nothing but a lifeless puppet in the hands of a perverse deity. As Žižek points out, behind all actions of this puppet lurks a fundamental and perverse passivity. Like Frankenstein who came to fear his own creation, Kant fears the quasi-sovereign puppets playing in his own puppet theatre.

So, Haraway's bastards are not necessarily more creepy than Kant's free and noumenal subject for this subject seems to us essentially *mechanic*: the parts of which it is composed are related to each other and are expected to smoothly carry out their tasks. This is the mechanism which characterises bureaucratic organisations and departments. God and CEO are pulling the strings. As Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 288) have pointed out, these machines operate under a regimen of stability, uniformity, harmony, structure, function, and isolation.

Mechanic and machinic

Cyborgs are not at all like this. The bastard is not mechanical at all but, to use a phrase coined by Deleuze and Guattari, machinic (*machinique* rather than *méchanique*). The cyborg is, in other words, a non-mechanic machine and in discussing interfaces and virtual reality we should make a distinction between non-mechanic and mechanic machines. The refusal to take this distinction seriously is what causes the anxiety many people seem to feel when confronted with the idea of a man-machine unity. A machinic machine, however, is never stable at all: it incessantly creates and recreates itself. It also accepts that the relationship between self and non-self is quite vague: it works, as Massumi (1992: 192) points out, by dint of contamination rather than by dint of isolation. Even more importantly, it is not subordinated to a master pulling the strings but rather loses itself in a continuous play with its environment. The machinic machine is an open ended process.

Where mechanic machines focus on organisation and harmony, machinic machines focus on disorganisation and disharmony. The mechanic machine acknowledges the boundaries with the environment: inside is doomed to be inside and in this inside the menacing shadow of the puppet master is always present. The machinic machine, on the other hand, plays with boundaries and is not a tool in the hands of what is deemed to be 'higher', say, a human being, a puppet master, or God (Ansell Pearson, 1999: 141).

Indeed, precisely by serving its own functionality, it is able to be permeated by desire. Cells in our bodies are examples of machinic machines who are constantly contaminated by their environment. These machines are continually engaged in boundary games: the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' loses its significance in the endless experiments they carry out. Moreover, machinic machines work all by themselves and are not playthings in hands of a supervisor (God, CEO, politician, repairman, and so on). Yet they are, like the cells in our body, constantly contaminated by the environment in which they find themselves. This is what makes them profoundly hybrid.

To recapitulate, the fear for Haraway's cyborgs might vanish if we bear in mind the all-important distinction between mechanic and machinic and learn to understand cyborgs as machinic machines. All other distinctions - natural/artificial, living/dead, organic/mechanic - cause us to treat the man-machine interface in a too rigid and spine-chilling fashion. If we are able to abandon the logic of isolation that underlies those distinctions, we may find more nuanced ways of understanding such interfaces. The history of ideas clearly shows where more nuanced views can be found: Dante and Ficino's efforts to understand and play with notions like community, isolation, togetherness, immunity, contagion, and so on are important intellectual precursors for our apprehension of a life between faces that are not necessarily always faces.

Epilogue: a bumble bee

Would this satisfy the Cartesian ego or humanist? Perhaps he or she might retort that machines are unlike people in the sense that they can only reproduce by dint of human intervention. Deleuze and Guattari quote Samuel Butler in order to rebut this objection:

> [D]oes anyone say that the red clover has no reproductive system because the bumble bee (and the bumble bee only) must aid and abet it before it can reproduce? No one. The bumble bee is a part of the reproductive system of the clover. Each one of ourselves has sprung from minute animalcules whose entity was entirely distinct from our own ... These creatures are part of our reproductive system; then why not we part of that of the machines? We are misled by considering any complicated machine as a single thing ... (Samuel Butler quoted in: Deleuze and Guattari, 1983: 285)

Deleuze and Guattari conclude from this that we should not only put into question the Cartesian or humanist idea that the individual is an organic entity but also the mechanic idea that the machine is a structural entity. We should apprehend that both ideas are spine-chilling if we are to enhance our understanding of interfaces.

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